

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PBM - 25  
Meet Otto Schwellnus

101 Alteryn Mansions  
Corlett Drive  
Illovo, Johannesburg  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue,  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers :

May I introduce Otto Schwellnus, editor of Dagbreek en Sondagnuus, the Johannesburg Afrikaans-language Sunday newspaper? He is what I call a "detrribalized Afrikaner," by which I mean that he is bilingual but uses Afrikaans as his home language, vigorously supports the Nationalist Party but has put aside the Biblical and race-superiority arguments of the platteland Afrikaner to explain his concept of the Nationalist Party policy, racial and otherwise.

When I first met Otto he was standing in Commissioner Street in front of his Majesty's Cellar, a mace-and-pikestaff decorated restaurant where the food, happily, is not so drab and depressing as the interior decoration. I was with an almost-bilingual American friend of mine who had arranged the luncheon meeting and we were pushing through the biting winter wind talking about the joys of darkroom work. As we turned from the sidewalk into the fake stone hallway of the restaurant, we brushed against a small man standing just inside the door. "Excuse me," apologized my friend as we passed. We walked a few steps farther, then my friend stopped and turned back. "Otto," he said, returning to the man in the doorway, "I didn't recognize you at first. How are you?"

I don't think that my first meeting with Otto could have been more appropriate. He is just as my friend unconsciously described him--the kind of man you don't recognize at first. Even now, as I write this, I'm not quite sure whether he wears a thin moustache or not and I have seen him many times since that first meeting. His eyes are his most outstanding feature--sharp, dark and responsive. And although he seemed small as my friend and I passed him at the restaurant, he is not short or thin--compressed is more the word.

He must be about 40, although his hair is still dark, and he dresses in half-tones; gray overcoat, gray suit, dark tie and, usually, a tan or gray sleeveless sweater under his suit coat. His clothes look neither old nor new, expensive nor cheap--they are simply clothes and there is nothing about them that attracts notice except their general unobtrusiveness. The son of a German missionary, he has been a newspaper man all his life and has spent most of that life in Johannesburg. It is probably his newspaper life in the city that has caused him to stop using the traditional reasoning of the backveld Boer. Technically, of course, he is not an Afrikaner at all, but he considers himself one.

One of the first things we talked about during luncheon among the hanging chains and flagstones was the "Noah theory" taught by many branches of the Dutch Reformed Church. The theory stems from the following passage from the Bible (Genesis IX, 20-27): "And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be

unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant." Afrikaner children are taught that Natives are descended from Canaan, whose father was so disrespectful to Noah, and therefore are destined to be servants to white South Africans, who, naturally, are descended from Shem and Japheth.

"Oh yes, I was taught that too," Otto said as he put down his empty tomato juice glass. "But I doubt whether you could find a single educated Afrikaner today who would use that argument by itself as justification for the Nationalist Native policy." Otto spoke fluent English with just a trace of guttural accent. He suffered a slight lapse when he came to "justification," and looked to my friend for help. When help was given, he continued with no break in his train of thought.

"You easily could find it in the platteland, but Afrikaners don't talk that way in Johannesburg, as a rule. It is of course part of our early training and you would be right in saying that we believe it in the way that you believe that George Washington could not tell a lie--it is a nice story and it helps us to be good boys but it is not the only reason for our way of life."

The waiter brought our food--rare sirloin steaks for Otto and my friend and an omelet bien donne for me--and Otto went on, putting into plain and forthright English his feelings towards his country's problems. It was clear that he was anxious for me to know the Afrikaner's answers to the usual questions put by the United Party, visiting Americans and liberal Englishmen.

"We say this is our country but we do not mean that it is our country because we won it from the Natives with guns. The Natives, that is the Bantu, came into the country from the north as the Voortrekkers (pioneers) were moving from the south. Neither came first, actually. From the beginning it was obvious that these black men could not be trusted with the land or with self-government on western lines so they were given reserves where they could follow their ancient ways of planting a crop--always taking from the land and never replacing anything.

"Now they want everything--after a few generations only they think they are civilized men--they want the vote, they want the end of the color bar, they want this, they want that. To give them what they ask means only one thing--the end of all we have built in this country. Can you imagine what would happen in a Parliament elected by 9,000,000 kaffirs?"

Otto practically shuddered as he bent to the dissection of his steak. After a few mouthfuls he gazed distractedly at the blood bath my friend was giving his French fries with an upended ketchup bottle--then turned back to me. "What is a civilized man, anyway? The Portuguese say a civilized Native is one who has cut himself off from all contact with other Natives, has joined the Catholic Church and can read and write. Old Huggins sets up qualifications of reading and writing and income. You can't tell me that a man has absorbed western civilization just because he can read or write or because he has a certain amount of money. Maybe the Portuguese have the right idea, but can you imagine a South African Native cutting himself off from all contact with other Natives? It can't be done.

"It may be that your American Negroes are civilized by now, but I doubt whether there are more than a thousand Natives here you could call civilized. Just look at

the power of the witch doctors. Look at all that eroded farmland in the Native Reserves. Look at the ritual murders. And just look at Mau Mau. You would have trouble convincing South Africans, Afrikaners or British, that these Natives are ready for anything like self-government."

The conversation wandered off into a discussion of witch doctors and their rites, winding up with a story from my friend about how he had been given the names of the winners of both the Durban July Handicap and the English Derby by his elevator boy--who, in turn, had got them from his favorite witch doctor. The steak and omelet were gone by now and as we sat over cheese, crackers and coffee the talk drifted around to apartheid.

"I don't honestly see how you can expect it to work," my friend said. "In the first place, you have expanding industry around all the big European towns and, in the second place, the Government has restricted immigration so much that there just aren't enough Europeans to fill up the factories so that the Natives can go back to the reserves."

"Ah," said Otto. "But you don't see the big thing that is coming. It will soon be necessary for all the new industries to be built in the reserves--or at least on the edges of the reserves."

"Why?" asked my friend.

"Water. All the expanding industry that you talk about requires water and there is not enough water in the present industrial cities to take care of them. But there are many rivers flowing through or on the edge of Native reserves. You mark my words, industry will move to the reserves because of the need for water. Then the tide will turn. These Natives who have come to the Witwatersrand to work will go back to their spiritual homes, the reserves, to work in the new factories there. Then you will see apartheid begin to work."

"But what about white immigration?" I asked. "The Government says it is doing what it can to preserve the place of the white man in South Africa. How can they preserve the white man's place if they cause immigration to drop to about 6000 a year as it did last year?"

"Ah, that's a bad thing. But you see, there is not room for a flood of untrained European farmers. Either they would be out of work and we would have the poor-white problem all over again or they would take jobs held by Natives."

"And what," asked my friend, "would the Government find wrong with that? It would force a lot of Natives out of industry and back to the reserves. It would be helping apartheid."

"Yes," came the answer, "but it would do a lot more than that. A white immigrant doing a Native's work would mean that the wage for the job would have to be raised to keep up the European standard of living. And if his wage were raised it would mean that the Native doing the same job would have reason to demand the same wage and it might harm the economy of the country. And if the Natives all went back to the reserves, they would most likely starve to death. Native farming methods are so bad that there wouldn't be enough food for them. No, the Government is perfectly right in restricting immigration. We just don't have room for them."

"I don't want this to develop into an argument," I said, "but what truth is there in the United Party claim that the Nationalists have restricted immigration because they are afraid that immigrants, coming from liberal Europe might all vote against the Nationalists and put them out of power?"

Otto glanced my way over the rim of his cup as he drank. Then he put it down and picked up the coffee pot to pour a fresh cup. Without looking at me he said, "There might be some truth in that." There was silence as he added cream. The conversation was ended.

Our next luncheon date was four or five days later, again at His Majesty's Cellar. Otto looked very much the same and as the three of us settled into our chairs my friend mentioned the questionnaire that has been sent out to former inmates of Boer War concentration camps run by the English. The questionnaires asked, among other things, whether ground glass and vitriol was found in prison camp food.<sup>1</sup>

Otto laughed. "I wouldn't pay much attention to that, if I were you. I don't think that organization is particularly strong."

"Perhaps," said my friend, "but it's a good indication of how things are between Afrikaner and British South Africans."

"I don't think things are as black as you paint them," Otto answered. "I have many good friends who are English-speaking. Of course, there are problems, and it is hard for people with different languages to get together, but I think the situation is much better today than it was 25 years ago. You must realize that the Afrikaner must fight to keep his language and traditions alive. That is why the Church and our schools keep up the fight. Our history teachers, for instance, teach us a very different story of the Boer War than the story you will find in English text books. We are taught about the concentration camps--how women and children died because there were no doctors or medicines or sanitary facilities and how they were transported from place to place in open railway trucks. We are taught that the reason for the war was the British desire for colonies and gold. And, most important of all, we are taught that after the war Lord Milner prohibited schools from using Afrikaans as the medium of instruction.

"It is this early teaching that makes the average Afrikaner dislike the British. It is like the last war--the Americans and the English hated the Germans as a nation, but found that the ordinary German individual was a quite normal, likeable person. You might say that, as a people, the Afrikaners dislike the British intensely--but not as individuals. So there is anti-British feeling. But for the average Afrikaner it something in the background, like the Bible story about Noah's son. It is part of our way of life, but it is not always in our minds.

"But the fanatical Afrikaner--ah, that is a different story. Members of the Broederbond,<sup>2</sup> for instance--I'm not a member, but I've been approached to join--they are extremely anti-British and their constant goal is to free the country from the British yoke. And, of course, many say that the Broederbond must have some influence on the Government since Dr. Malan and J. G. Strydom (Minister of Lands) are both members.

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1. See footnote, FBM - 24, Page 4.

2. See FBM - 24, Page 5, Paragraph 3.

"The Broederbond pays little attention to bread-and-butter politics like the budget. It is interested in ideological legislation--like making it compulsory under the law for children of Afrikaans-speaking parents to attend Afrikaans-medium schools. The Broederbond does not like moderation. One of the founders of the Broederbond was expelled because he grew to moderate in his old age. You can see him today, wandering about the streets of Johannesburg.

"The Church, too, is strongly anti-British and in favor of keeping the Native in his place. Many people also say that the Church is a powerful force in politics, especially since Dr. Malan is a predikant.<sup>1</sup> I don't agree. Malan may go along with the Church when it suits him, but he's much too good a politician to be influenced very much by it. I would say the same about the Broederbond. I doubt whether Malan goes to a Broederbond meeting more than once a year. And when he does go I don't think he is given instructions--it is more a matter of duty. The Broederbond is honored to have the Prime Minister attend and Malan is appreciative of Broederbond support. I don't think it goes farther than that."

Otto's lecture was cut off by the waiter who came to take the order. As we ate we talked about the desirability of parallel medium schools--public schools in which separate classes in English and Afrikaans but where English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking children would mix outside the classroom. Otto approved of the idea but doubted if it would work. English-speaking parents would be reluctant to have their children's language marred by Afrikaans expressions and Afrikaans-speaking parents would be afraid that their children would give up Afrikaans altogether, he said.

I saw Otto several times after that, but without talking politics. The other evening, however, Julie and I played bridge with Otto and his wife at the Schwellnus home in Parktown North, a middle-class Johannesburg suburb. It is a pleasant house with a comfortable open fire and gay scatter rugs strewn across a wide-planked floor. Otto's son, Paul, was there when he arrived but vanished politely after he had said how-do-you-do-Mr.-and-Mrs.-Martin.

By 10:30 I was licking my wounds and trying to find some mistake in my addition of negative scores when Mrs. Schwellnus went into the kitchen to make tea. The talk suddenly turned from the vagaries of Native 'servants to the possibility of a South African Republic and I asked Otto, "When do you think the Republic will come?"

"I don't think it's practical politics just now," he said. "A few months ago it was a live issue. But I doubt whether, if an election were held tomorrow, Malan could get the two-thirds majority. The Republic was postponed when 'Nye' Bevan fell out with the British Labor Party."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Well, I think that Bevan might have helped to put the Labor Party back in power. And a Labor Government in England is the best chance South Africa has of becoming a republic. If they (a Labor Government) tried to do in Nyasaland or Kenya what they did in the Gold Coast--or if they decided to make the Gold Coast a full dominion--there would be such a strong reaction here against Britain that we could vote in a republic without any trouble. But it doesn't look as if there will be a Labor Government in England for a long time. Of course, we still want as much self-

1. Malan is a Minister of the Dutch Reformed Church.

government within the Commonwealth as we can get--we must have complete control over our affairs if we are to keep South Africa. But even I think it would be a mistake to leave the Commonwealth completely just now. We would be too small--too cut off--and we need the protection and the trade advantages that derive from Commonwealth membership. The Republic is bound to come some day--but not as soon as people are saying."

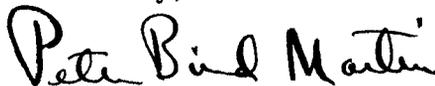
These are the words of a moderate Afrikaner Nationalist. They are clear words and need little interpretation by me. His views on the position of Natives is typical; they should, eventually, return to their "spiritual homes," the Reserves. He points out that they are uncivilized, slow to learn and are incapable of governing themselves. He does not, however, write them off forever, saying that they are naturally stupid and will never absorb western civilization. He agrees that restriction of white immigration is necessary if the European standard of living is to be maintained. He sees the anti-British sentiment of the Afrikaner and is himself somewhat anti-British, especially in regard to the preservation of Afrikaans. He denies that anti-British feeling is growing among educated Afrikaners--he compares it, in fact, with the feeling that existed between North and South following the American Civil War. He thinks there should be more intermingling of English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking children--but insists on preservation of Afrikaans and finds objections to parallel-medium schools.

He admits there are fanatical Afrikaners, even in the Government, and that their feelings towards the British have not grown more tolerant.

He is sure the South African Republic is coming, but not soon.

It is only fair to warn you that Otto is diplomatic enough to have softened his views to suit his American audience. He is intelligent enough to realize just how much Afrikaner Nationalism an American can swallow. I believe he was sincere in all he told me--but he may well have sweetened his words with moderate sugar.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

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